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Closeness and distance:

Using close reading as a method of educational enquiry in English Studies

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Keywords

Abstracts, argument, close reading, distant reading, English, essay, interdisciplinarity, scholarship of teaching and learning, tutorial, writing

Abstract

This article draws on a pedagogical case study in order to reflect on the value of using a Humanities disciplinary practice (the 'close reading' of literary studies) as a method of educational enquiry and to provide a worked example of this approach. We explore the introduction of a pedagogic strategy – students writing abstracts for essays and sharing them in advance of group discussion – into the tutorial at the University of Oxford, and an evaluation of it. We then read the student 'texts' (written abstracts and evaluation forms) more closely, to problematize the initial evaluation findings and reveal hidden aspects of student learning and the teaching relationship. We reflect upon our approach and suggest some of the difficulties and advantages of 'close reading' student texts while achieving scholarly 'distance' as a pedagogic research practice. In addition, we explore further the relations between social science and humanities approaches to educational enquiry.

Introduction

As a method of literary criticism, 'close reading' has been a core disciplinary practice in literary studies since it was pioneered in the 'practical criticism' of the influential Cambridge School in the 1920s (Baldick, 1988). To read closely is to perform a purposeful and skilled analysis and interpretation of the structural, stylistic, and linguistic features of a literary text. As a prevalent critical practice (although not unchallenged in its dominance: see for example Bialostosky, 2006; Moretti, 2013), close reading has a central role in Higher Education literary teaching and learning. The UK Quality Assurance Agency subject benchmark statement for English (which 'defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies') describes 'critical skills in the close reading, description, analysis or production of texts or discourses' as one of the key skills of English (QAA, 2007). The definition of a 'text' available for analysis in English studies has expanded in recent years beyond narrow national, historical, and generic canons, and students of language and literature study a broad range of genres, forms, and

discourses, historical and contemporary. Likewise 'close reading' has been associated over time with a number of different approaches and sometimes conflicting aims for English studies, such that it can be said to be a field of research and teaching practice, rather than a single uniform approach (see for example Baldick, 1988; Eagleton, 2007; Graff, 1987; Hofer, 2014).

Commentators have drawn attention to the paradox that literary critics, so familiar with interpreting and commenting on texts, are not more curious about the 'texts' that their students write, and the relationship between student text and student learning (Bass and Linkon, 2008; Chick, 2013). Analysing student writing – whether in the form of written evaluation or student work – poses critical problems of meaning and interpretation. Teachers are, of course, regularly in control of deciding the 'meaning' of a student's written work when they assess it. They also regularly review evaluative feedback about their teaching, though they may not control the form in which it is couched. However, in neither of these instances do teachers regularly attempt an analytical or close reading of these texts, nor, crucially, do they typically share their understandings in a public forum.

Humanities scholars have also been exhorted to draw upon the traditions of their own discipline to explore issues in teaching and learning (Cleaver et al, 2014; Kreber, 2009; Gurung et al, 2009; Healey, 2000; Huber, 2000; McKinney, 2013; Shulman, 2005). Two recent key voices in this debate have outlined specific ways in which 'close reading' might be usefully employed for educational enquiry in English Studies. Bass and Linkon (2008) advocate that English teachers have the analytic tools to undertake scholarship of teaching and learning, but are not yet using them to their full advantage. Crucially, their argument is based upon the observation that many published articles in the US journal *Pedagogy* analyse and scrutinise the teacher's intentions and approaches to teaching, but not student voices or texts. Bass and Linkon link the use of the student 'text' to the practice of 'close reading', to suggest a formula for future educational enquiry.

Nancy Chick (2013) has subsequently defined 'close reading' further. She argues that 'Literary SOTL (scholarship of teaching and learning) scholars approach student-generated texts [...] as documents that can reveal much about moments of thinking and learning within their contexts of a classroom, an institution, a region, and what may be called the student condition' (24). Chick calls this 'careful, rigorous, close and distant analysis to students texts [in order to] lead to multi-layered considerations of their demonstrations of their learning and sometimes, more importantly, [to indicate] when their learning falls short.' (23) She argues that

close reading can draw our attention to previously neglected aspects of student learning, and thus the practice of reading should involve both stepping back and looking closely. She builds a case for including contextual and cultural details of 'learning moments' (28) in our analysis of student learning, and for striving for rich detail rather than objective and generalizable results. In this, she argues that many social scientific journal practices (word **limit**, expectations of process in research) inhibit the development of educational enquiry in the humanities.

Both Bass and Linkon (2008) and Chick (2013) also highlight significant differences between 'close reading' and typical social-science approaches to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Bass and Linkon argue that social-science approaches, which they summarise as 'well-designed questions, controlled studies, systematic analysis, or objective results' leave literary scholars confused and resistant (246). Humanities academics entering the discourse of educational enquiry are confronted with, as Cleaver et al (2014) elsewhere describe, 'unfamiliar paradigms, language, research approaches and methods and understandings of 'validity''. Chick is also attentive to the way in which educational enquiries tend to be judged by social-science standards, and she highlights that her definition of close reading may be dismissed by some, because she promotes a form of close study that some social scientists would reject as 'unreliable, unrepresentative, decontextualized, and atheoretical'(Chick, 2013: 25).

Chick (2013) also draws attention to the ways in which 'close' readings of student texts need to have an element of distance to them ('close and distant reading') and as such she begins to draw upon some contemporary debates within English studies. Chick is drawing directly from Robert Scholes (2002), who argues that in teaching 'close reading' to students we are actually asking them to step back from their own preconceptions and to be open to new ways of thinking and understanding. The terms of 'close' and 'distant' reading have also been tremendously productive in the last decade for discussing and opening up fields of research for English studies (see for example Hofer, 2014; Moretti, 2013; Middleton, 2005; Ascari, 2014). We are not proposing to enter fully into this debate here, but rather to note what a rich field of discussion may be available to English scholars for thinking about the analysis and interpretation of student texts, not least because these terms are already the subject of pedagogical as well as scholarly debate (Scholes, 2002; Bialostosky, 2006).

What we are seeing here is an emerging nexus of issues in relation to using 'close reading' as a practice for educational enquiry. First, we see a move away from teacher discourse towards analysing student texts, and studying the interactions between teachers and students. Second, we see a growing interest in forms of interpretation which can loosely be defined as 'close reading' practices, which is a large, eclectic and contested field. Third, we see concerns about how we define and give value to 'close reading' in the new context of educational enquiry: whether this is through the use of theory; the richness of the description, or the nature of the claims which we make for the findings. We see in the writing of Chick, Bass and Linkon that there is a temptation to contrast the humanities with the social sciences. Yet, as O'Loughlin and Fulton (2014) have discussed, the practice of close reading also has much in common with methods employed in social science disciplines. O'Loughlin and Fulton suggest that there is an under-exploited 'symbiotic relationship' (2014: 193) which could permit humanities scholars an interdisciplinary freedom to utilize the best of disciplinary and social-science research approaches.

We want to explore some of these issues below, so that our teaching experiment, described here, and its evaluation stand both as a pedagogical case study, and as a way to interrogate the notion of 'close reading' as a practice for the scholarship of teaching and learning. We reflect upon the processes we engaged with, and will suggest some of the difficulties and advantages of 'close reading' as a practice. In addition, we will explore further the relations between social science and humanities approaches to educational enquiry.

Abstract writing in English tutorials: approach and evaluation

This article began as a small-scale practitioner evaluation of the addition of an extra task to tutorial preparation for a group of first and second year English undergraduates studying Old and Middle English literature and language with the tutor at an Oxford college. In the Humanities at Oxford, students typically prepare an essay in advance of a one-hour tutorial, which takes place with one tutor and up to two other students (for a detailed exposition of the tutorial system, see Horn, 2013; Ashwin, 2005). The essay is written in response to a choice of titles and reading list for that week of study. For a single 'paper' (approximately one sixth of a year of study) students will have up to 8 tutorials or a mixture of small classes and tutorials. The tutorial essay does not contribute to final grading. Rather, essays are used as the basis for tutorial discussion and students subsequently use their notes as a starting point for their exam revision. Student work for both papers included in this study is assessed by an exam taken either at the end of the first year or, in the case of

second-year students, to be taken at the end of the third year. Both exams require essays and/or critical commentaries, and the essay questions cover a broad range of topics and texts. One difficult aspect of teaching the Old English paper is that students are expected to read the texts closely and to gather evidence about their literary and linguistic features to build a persuasive argument, in both essays and commentaries. The unfamiliar language and historical-cultural distance present obvious barriers to this process, and students often find it more challenging to 'close read' an Old English poem – or even generally to view it as a work of literature – than they would a modern poem. The tutor who teaches the tutorials may or may not act as an examiner (writing the exam; marking scripts), and in any case would mark anonymised scripts. In this respect, teaching and summative assessment are uncoupled processes.

The Oxford tutorial system in English can be described as writing- and feedback-intensive (Gibbs, 2015: 196-7). Students typically complete 10-16 pieces of written work in a term (a term lasts eight weeks, with three terms per academic year) and essays tend to be around 2000 words each. The turnaround time for feedback in this case was very short, as essays were handed in around 24 hours before the tutorial and usually returned during the tutorial or shortly afterwards.

The additional step that was added to the tutorial in this study was to ask each student to submit a 100-200 word abstract for their essay when they sent it to their tutor, and to also send this abstract to their tutorial partners (one or two other students in the same year). Each student was asked to attend the tutorial having read the abstracts of their peers, and with at least one question to ask about the essays that the other students had written. The initial impetus to introduce essay abstracts was tutor dissatisfaction with a number of issues observed when students were asked to summarize their tutorial essays verbally, without a prior preparation activity.¹ These included some students struggling with extemporised verbal argument summary, which raised concerns about equality of opportunity in this teaching setting. Less confident students were often reluctant to ask direct questions of their peers when prompted by the tutor, and peer questions were often simple and factual rather than critical. Discussion was likely to be tutor-student rather than peer-peer, and questions were almost always tutor-initiated.

Evaluation process and responses

The practice was introduced in 2012 and continued and formally evaluated in 2013. Evaluation was conducted through two questionnaires, which shared common questions and also contained some specific questions for

each of the two participating year groups (see Appendix 1 for the two questionnaires). All students in both year groups (9 first years; 8 second years) agreed to participate in the evaluation process and to submit their abstracts from the year's work to be considered as part of the analysis.

A straightforward interpretation of the evaluation responses shows that students generally found the process of writing an abstract and discussing it in their tutorial to be beneficial to certain aspects of their learning. First years were more enthusiastic than their second-year peers about the activity, and there was a greater sense from second year students that the value of this activity had reduced over time, a point which will be discussed in more detail below.

When students were asked to reflect on the practice of sharing and discussing essay abstracts, the response was overwhelmingly positive, with almost all reporting at least one benefit. Perceived benefits included improvements to: the standard of discussion ('encouraged productive debate'; 'an easy 'jumping-off' point'); verbal communication ('it helped me explain my thoughts to others'); understanding of the tutorial partner's ideas ('it meant I came to tutorials with something to ask [them]'); focus/clarity/efficiency ('much more focussed than trying to impromptu summarise each argument'). These responses confirm arguments made in the research literature about the potential, although not guaranteed, benefits of peer review and low-stakes formative feedback (see for example Evans 2013; Nicol 2010; Sadler 2010; Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006).

Although abstracts had been introduced primarily as a method for opening tutorial discussion, the evaluation also sought to determine whether they were of help during the writing process (which aspect will form the focus of our analysis). Learning to develop a focussed argument in response to an essay question is an important part of student development, particularly in the first year of undergraduate study. It can be a particular issue for students at Oxford who are frequently expected to engage with a large amount of material (a text or set of texts and associated literary criticism) in the space of a week or fortnight, before moving on to a new (although related) topic. Students reported benefits for three particular areas relating to writing practices: 1) argumentation of their essay: 'helping and encouraging me to edit and assess the logic, coherence, and conciseness of my argument'; 2) helping develop and clarify ideas: 'for very little extra effort it helped to clarify the essays and direct research'; 3) focus, planning, and structure: 'greater focus and structure...it summarises and facilitates the planning process'. Another benefit that students reported in their questionnaires was for exam revision: 'I might write abstracts during revision to see how effectively I can

devise an argument quickly for a given question'. Some students also recognised abstract writing as an academic research practice in its own right, and were glad to be developing it as a skill: 'good practice for clarifying arguments and for the abstracts that have to be written for coursework essays [third-year summative assignments]'.

Some important negative outcomes were raised. One student observed that the benefits of impromptu verbal summary might be lost: 'Sometimes it was helpful, at other times it might have been better to summarize my argument from memory as it would have forced me to re-engage with my ideas'. Concerns were also raised specifically about the process of summarizing and the fear that this produces unhelpful levels of generalization: 'Often my abstract and my tute partner's abstracts were more like general summaries of the essay content rather than clear delineation of argument, making it harder to engage'; 'some subtleties were overlooked'. Students did not observe that their contributions were necessarily more critical, one of the hoped-for outcomes. However the tutor's perception was that students asked each other questions much more willingly than without abstracts, and that these were more frequently well-conceived and critically engaged.

Student essay abstracts: reading more closely

A reading of the evaluation data in comparison with the abstracts themselves adds an additional and more complex layer of evidence to the evaluation process. In several cases, the students whose abstracts show, over time, that they are trying to implement a new writing strategy, seem to be the same students that are ambivalent about the process in their evaluation. In contrast, some of the students who are especially positive about writing abstracts already demonstrate an excellent grasp of the process and, therefore, relatively little need for the exercise.

Take the case of LM, whose feedback is mixed about whether the process of writing abstracts has helped his writing or his contributions to tutorials. Here are some extracts from his evaluation feedback:

It helped me to find a focused argument.

[It was] a reminder to choose a focused argument and to remind myself and my tute [tutorial] partner of what it was I wrote on.

It didn't really influence the argument itself (apart from making it more focused).

It was helpful to introduce me to the content of the other person's essay. Often my abstract and my tute partner's were more like general summaries of the essay content rather than clear delineation of argument, making it harder to engage.

In first year it forced me to write a focused argument, but by second year this had become a habit.

Notice here how often the terms 'focus' and 'argument', are repeated. This student knows a focused argument is required for both essay and abstract, but this repetitive overwording betrays that the terms are more remembered than fully integrated into practice. 'Reminders' are needed, and 'focus' needs to be consciously found and put into the essay. Indeed, a slippage away from 'focused argument' is revealed when thinking about the role of the abstracts in the tutorial: 'often my abstract [was]...more like general summaries of the essay content...making it harder to engage'. Furthermore, for this student, the tutorial partner's essay is conceived of primarily as 'content' rather than as an 'argument'. Although LM tells us in the final comment shown here that a focused argument is by now a 'habit', the restless and repetitive nature of these comments belies some insecurity.

When we compare LM's comments to the abstracts he wrote for the term's work, there is a progression from a descriptive style in which the elaboration of content predominates, towards a more structured delineation of arguments. The following edited extracts, just giving the key conjunctions of the abstracts, highlight this change. It is worth noting also that the typical length of LM's abstracts reduces by about a third during the term as the amount of broad description diminishes:

- 1) My essay was in two parts...in the first part I explored...and looked at...In the second part I explored...and I looked at...Ultimately, however, I concluded that... [157 words]
- 2) I explored how...I began by...However, this is quickly problematized by...I argue that....I concluded that.... [189 words]
- 3) I explored...I looked at...Yet...Ultimately, I suggested that....and that... [137 words]
- 4) I argued that...I traced...and concluded.... [125 words]

It should be emphasised that LM's work shows a gradual improvement over time, not a sudden shift in achievement. What we suggest is that between the evaluation comments and the abstracts themselves we can perceive a movement from writing 'content' in a summarising way, towards the goal of a 'focused argument'. This process is not fully complete at the point in time at which LM fills in his evaluation form.

When we look at LM's evaluation comments in isolation from his abstracts, it is easy to conclude with him that the abstracts exercise was of some, but not great help to LM. However, another reading of LM's feedback, particularly when compared with his abstract writing, is to suggest that the repetition of terms such as 'focused argument' can be related to progress in his writing, and that his ambivalence might relate to work

which he is putting in and which has not yet fully paid dividends. This development may not be something of which LM is fully aware: he both feels he has already got it, and his comments suggest he has not yet done so. What a close reading can show here is that while LM himself is only mildly positive about the abstract work, he may be underestimating the effect it may be having on his writing and thinking. Precisely because he has not yet fully integrated this approach into his writing his comments reveal ambivalence about his own progress and whether he needs further help.

A first-year student, BC, also exemplifies the problem of relating feedback comments to progress. BC observed that writing an abstract 'made me focus on and figure out the exact argument I was making' and that planning was 'more focussed'. In the second essay of term, responding to the question 'As far as *The Battle of Maldon* [an Old English heroic poem] is concerned, is [the Anglo-Saxon leader] Byrhtnoth to be admired, pitied, or condemned?', the student wrote:

This essay attempts to explore the ways in which Byrhtnoth [sic] is represented in *The Battle of Maldon*. These are varied and critical opinion has various focuses in this debate. The focuses of this essay are on the meaning of *ofermod* and the importance of this question, the true aim of Byrhtnoth in this battle, and the descriptions of Byrhtnoth's strong leadership. It also discusses the poem's political message and the ultimate heroism of the thanes.

The word focus, which the student identified in their evaluation as a positive quality in relation to abstract-writing, appears twice here. The student describes, without any specificity, the 'various focuses' (sic) of critical opinion, and highlights a few that this essay will treat. The themes the student has identified are relevant to the question. However, although she described knowing the 'exact argument [she] was making', from a tutor's perspective, the abstract did not reflect an argument: the ideas were all presented as equally important, the verbs used ('explore', 'discuss') do not reveal the author's stance on the concepts listed, and no clear conclusion seems to have been reached.

Perhaps the abstract was helpful to this student – who reported that he/she wrote the abstract during the process of essay writing – in identifying these points of focus for the essay. But it does not seem to have been beneficial in developing a position in relation to the question. As with LM, above, this student appears to be thinking about focus and argumentation, a process which takes time to feed into successful writing practices. The student's final abstract of term took a stronger stance ('The essay argues that this sort of reading does not allow for the subtlety and psychological complexity...'). Yet in the evaluation, this student felt that, overall, the introduction of abstracts made 'minimal difference' to the planning and writing of essays, and felt that it did

‘not really [help me] to explore my thoughts further – it was often just a rehashing of ideas I had already expressed.’ In this case, it seems that analysis of the abstracts was beneficial for the tutor to identify why this student was not presenting their ‘exact argument’ as successfully as they believed – but the student has not been fully aware of this process.

BC’s comments can be contrasted productively with the opinions of another first-year student, EF, who reported that writing an abstract ‘forced me to question and pin down my argument.’ The student here reports benefits in relation to the way he understood his own argument and expressed it in the abstract (and then the tutorial). EF wrote the following abstract, in response to the question, ‘How central are the themes of glory and fate to *The Battle of Maldon* and *Battle of Brunanburh*?’

My essay is focussed upon the themes of glory and fate in *The Battle of Maldon*. I also look at the *Battle of Brunanburh*. I argue that the pursuit of glory is the central theme of heroic poetry and that it governs many important decisions. Glory is intrinsically connected to battle and this is why it becomes an ambition to die on the battlefield, beside one’s lord. I argue that free will takes precedence over fate in *Maldon* because each of the men is able to make the choice either to remain on the battlefield or to flee to safety. This choice allows those in the poem to experience both defeat and glory simultaneously.

Although the abstract begins by simply restating the title question, it quickly establishes a position in clear and direct relation to the first part of it, showing relevant knowledge. The student then develops an argument in relation to the second part of the question, before drawing both halves together in the concluding sentence. He has succeeded in moving beyond the simple ‘how central’ question to establish a more complex point about how the two elements relate and to say something meaningful of his own about the nature of the poem. Although he reports in the evaluation that it has not played a role in essay development, the abstract represents the student’s argument successfully. It has helped the student engage with his own written work: ‘in tutorial I at least immediately knew what my argument was’; ‘if I look back on essays now I know more readily what they were about.’

If we compare their abstracts, we can see that BC is reluctant to present her voice with any authority: the subject of her sentences is ‘This essay’ rather than a pronoun, she uses hedging language (‘attempts to explore’), and does not successfully distinguish an opinion of her own from the ‘various focuses’ of ‘critical opinion’ (demonstrating what Groom (2000) calls the ‘unaverred voice’). EF, in contrast, projects a clearly authoritative voice (‘My essay’, ‘I argue’). Although the use of the first person in academic writing is a matter of disciplinary convention and taste, the difference here is suggestive and can be related to the process of

learning to express self-generated arguments in an independent voice. Student EF, who produces an abstract which more fully represents a developed argument, recognises limitation as an important part of structuring an argumentative essay. Student BC, however, who lists a wider range of related themes but does not place them in a hierarchy or reach a conclusion, feels that 'at this stage' it 'might have been useful' to 'explore outside the argument'. We can propose that EF's positive comments demonstrate a good grasp of the point of the exercise, while BC's demonstrate a more problematic grappling with essay construction. However, these students' perspectives also reflect tensions in the purpose of the tutorial essay: it should allow the student to record comprehensively their research and 'cover' the week's topic, and also help the student to present a tightly composed argument as practice for the exam. These two students have tackled their work in different ways: one exploring detail about a wide range of topics, the other thinking analytically about the relationships between a narrow range of topics. BC wrote in her evaluation that being asked to write an abstract 'meant that I felt like I couldn't explore outside the argument (something that – at this stage – might have been useful).' This sense of frustration with abstract-writing as a restrictive exercise was present in other answers, particularly second-year responses: 'sometimes it was not possible to express every facet of the argument'.

For examinations, students must master a breadth of material and present it in a tightly written argument, and this is a fundamental tension within the tutorial format. The abstract exercise seems better suited to supporting the essay as a writing exercise rather than an exploratory research task and is undertaken most successfully by students who value this aspect of the tutorial essay. A student-written review of teaching in Oxford argued that resolving the mismatch perceived by students 'between developing an argument over a week and taking several hours to write the [tutorial] essay, and having to develop a coherent argument in under an hour [in an exam]' would help student anxiety over finals (OUSU, 2010, n.p.). However, as Horn (2013) has explored, that same 'constructive misalignment' allows for flexibility and freedom for tutor and student alike, particularly with regard to 'learning for its sake' alongside than 'learning for assessment', and it is not necessarily desirable to restrict the freedoms inherent in the tutorial model.

In the examples above we see that tensions between an 'argumentative' and a 'coverage' approach to essay writing reveal themselves through the abstract writing activity. These tensions highlight the ways in which student and tutor perceptions of use and progress can be at odds with each other without either party being

fully right or wrong. The exercise of writing abstracts seems to act as a focus for some of these concerns and at least in some instances, to enable students to begin to voice their own perspective.

Tutor support and growing independence

Another facet of the evaluation forms is that we can pay attention to the ways in which the tutor is depicted within them and interpellated by them. These evaluation forms were not completed anonymously and so the comments that students make are knowingly addressed to the tutor. We can see traces in these forms of the ways in which students negotiate their relationship with their tutor, and how this may change over time. One theme which emerges is that a sense of the relationship with the tutor shifts between the first and second years of study. In response to the question 'could any changes be made to the exercise to make it more beneficial to you as a student?' five of the first years made requests that in various ways asked the tutor to help more, or to force them to do more work. For example, 'I could be made to write it BEFORE the essay', or 'teacher see abstract before submission', or 'more guidance about exactly how to structure the abstract'.

By contrast, many second-year students seem to be renegotiating their relationship with the tutor, and we see a shifting sense of personal responsibility, and desire to be more autonomous. GH states this most openly:

'often I was writing the abstracts to fulfil my tutor's deadline, rather than as part of my own learning experience'. JK 'stopped writing abstracts because I feel that an abstract and an introduction serve the same purpose' and says he 'did not value' the process. However, he demonstrates that he has 'learnt' this through the abstract-writing exercise itself: 'in the first year, I treated abstracts as appendages to my essays. I now realise that an essay should include an explicit description of its own argument'. JK is an interesting case because his position is inaccurate: an introduction and an abstract do not necessarily play exactly the same role and an introduction would be unlikely to give such a clear indication of the full argument of the essay. Yet by starting to include an 'explicit description of its own argument', a lesson learned from the abstract exercise, JK has improved his essay-writing technique. He indicates the problem with his position when he writes 'I have conflated - merged the process of writing an abstract with the process of writing an introduction'. Although he rethinks his use of the term and strikes it through, JK has indeed conflated them. JK represents an interesting conundrum for the teacher. He presents himself as having learned what there is to learn from the abstracts exercise, while also showing clearly that he has conflated two different writing tasks. Yet to continue to require

him to engage with a process he no longer values might activate his defensive side rather than a process of further learning.

Another way in which some of the students seem to signal their independence is through an avowal of inadequacy. Several of the students make comments which reveal perceived weaknesses. These declarations seem to play several different roles in their feedback to the tutor. On one level, they may signal self-awareness and a willingness to take responsibility for learning. At another level, they can also be interpreted as a defensive strategy, by which the tutor is being asked to keep a distance and not to scrutinise the student's tutorial preparation too closely. GH's feedback comments demonstrate an interesting ambivalence between independence and distance. After writing 'overtime, I wrote [abstracts] afterwards to 'fulfil' the need to hand one in', he adds '(sorry!)'. This comment in parenthesis can be read as both an informal gesture to a tutor he knows well and also as a distancing mechanism: he apologises for his inadequacy but the 'sorry' here functions not so much an apology as an indication that he is not prepared to undertake the abstracts exercise in the way that the tutor has suggested. GH continues to indicate a subversive approach to writing abstracts later on in the feedback sheet, again using brackets to add a personal comment and qualification:

Abstracts didn't influence argument, but later summed it up. (Though, if seriously rushed, abstracts would be submitted that were my introduction with 'This essay argues that...' tacked on to the front).

It is interesting to note that although GH did not actually submit an abstract which began 'this essay argues that...' he only produces one genuine abstract in the term, with the other two being similar or identical to his essay introduction. GH is communicating an attitude to his work here and a willingness to subvert the task set. With the tone of naughtiness that he strikes, he also seems keen to communicate a dissatisfaction with the exercise but not necessarily with the tutor, who he takes into his confidence at this point in time. While we could argue that this is 'poor' student behaviour, we can equally well see it as a sign of growing autonomy.

The initial review of the evaluation forms highlighted lower satisfaction with the exercise among second years than among first years. However, it is the close reading that has helped us to understand and explore this change, and to relate it to the new independence from their tutor that many students are negotiating. It is interesting to compare this interpretation with two studies of student and tutor conceptions of the tutorial, undertaken in the phenomenographical tradition. Paul Ashwin (2005; 2006) argues that student conceptions of the tutorial range from 'the tutor explaining what the student doesn't understand' to, at the

most advanced, ‘tutor and student exchanging views on the subject’. Clearly implied in this model is a development from dependence upon the tutor, to greater distance and independence. Ashwin also refers to a larger scale questionnaire study by Trigwell and Ashwin (2003) which surveyed 155 students. Here, they reported that students with more sophisticated conceptions of tutorials were more likely to perceive their learning environment as ‘supportive’. However, what supportive might mean, and how it might play out in individual student-tutor relationships is not explored in further detail. The tensions between dependence and independence that are traced in the evaluation for our project suggest that the journey to supported independence is not straightforward.

Reflection on the process of ‘close reading’

What is at stake when we attribute particular interpretations to a student’s text and theorise about the tensions and unspoken aspects of learning at university? Valuing student writing as textual production renders it open for analysis of student learning beyond the usual assessment processes. It has seemed to us, in the process of developing our arguments above, that assigning meaning to student writing carries a power that is immediate and personal, and which has different ethical implications compared with the analysis of literary or historical texts. One key difference is that, as literary critics, we are used to presenting arguments about texts and textual sources which are publicly available. Thus they can, in theory, be read in their entirety by someone else, who could offer an alternative or competing interpretation – and indeed refute our own reading. This permits an element of free play in the process of interpretation, because alternative readings can be proposed, and the interplay of different perspectives is enhanced by the publication of new interpretations and the modification of previous ones. By contrast, student texts are private and we can only make available fragments of them – those fragments, inevitably, which support our interpretation. For example, we could be accused in our analysis above, of only citing extracts from student writing which support our case and build an overly coherent narrative. We cannot expect anyone to publish a further interpretation of our data, simply because no one else can access it. In reflecting back on our process we note that the social-scientific procedure of closely documenting the process of interpreting, in order to underpin the credibility of the findings and the discussion, makes a great deal of sense when faced with the difficulty of asserting arguments about a set of texts (or data) that are inaccessible to the reader.

The charge of 'anecdotalism', highlighted by Chick (2013) is therefore important with regard to using close reading as an approach to analysing student writing. David Silverman (2001) helpfully explores a range of issues which might lead to the charge: using a few, telling examples (often the most exotic) without including contradictory data; selecting data which fits a conception (or preconception) of the phenomenon; not comparing reported behaviour with more 'naturally' occurring data (e.g. what we say we do compared with what we actually do); and the loss or inaccessibility of the original material so that any alternative interpretations cannot be generated.

To frame this in terms of reader-response theory, the researcher/reader has enormous power to control the meaning of the text. How far are our interpretations the product of our own preconceptions and search for meaning making? In our case, the fragmented and dialogic nature of the texts we are using is particularly acute. We are interpreting small elements of a much larger engagement between student(s) and teacher across a period of several months. These exchanges include tutorial conversations, essays and teacher instructions, and ongoing feedback from tutor to student. The students are writing for the tutor as well as about the tutor and some of the limits of what can be discussed in this context have already been set by the teaching encounter. One of the authors of this paper (Brookman) was the tutor, and therefore the addressee of the abstracts and the evaluation forms. The other author (Horn) is an educational developer who has not met the students concerned and therefore interprets at a distance. Our experiences as researchers confronting these student texts in many ways mirror those of the students engaging with the literary texts. As teachers, our task is to help students manage a complex interplay of closeness and distance, familiarity and strangeness. When confronted with an unfamiliar text (especially literature as 'distant' as Old or Middle English), a student reader needs to learn how to appreciate the distance and resist collapsing it or explaining it away. However, we also want to encourage students to engage closely with the material, to find concepts and connections that are meaningful to them, and to become fully 'familiar' with it. The same balancing is required when performing this type of analysis of texts produced by one's own students. The researcher risks reading them solely in the light of his or her own experiences and expectations ('confirmation bias'), as the language and concepts they contain may seem deceptively familiar and close while they in fact belie the separate and unknown experience of the student. But to distance oneself too far from the texts is to lose the rich context of subjective understanding of experiences and relationships that supports the analysis.

The reading we present above emerged from two different understandings of the texts from our closer and more distant viewpoints, as well as from an exchange between them. It has been equally notable to us, however, that one of the most productive aspects of this small study is that it juxtaposes two types of student texts: abstract writing, and student evaluation of the process. It is primarily through the comparison of these two forms – one might say ‘triangulation’ of student texts – that key ideas emerged. As Ascari describes (writing about literary research), ‘good researchers...keep their frame of mind flexible...[they] stand at the same time inside and outside themselves, using their mental resources and yet recognizing them as “relative” or “situated”.’ (4) The dual sources we chose to study and our dual researcher positionalities allowed us to render the familiar texts sufficiently distant for analysis (akin to the sociological ‘making strange’ described by Mills 2000[1959]). However, we cannot and do not claim that this distance is scientifically objective; it remains humanely subjective.

It is striking to us that in drawing on the processes of interpretation and close reading which are familiar to us from our disciplinary backgrounds, we have been able to learn more from a process of student evaluation than might otherwise be possible. As Bass and Linkon (2008) propose, we have been less systematic and more inductive than some branches of social science would prescribe. Equally, there are similarities with some fields of qualitative social science in our concern for analysing language and how social relations are constituted through language, both of which are common to fields such as discourse analysis and ethnomethodology. We feel that there is potential for a range of hermeneutic approaches within ‘close reading’ to be employed for different purposes in interpreting student texts to explore issues with learning. The practices of ‘close reading’ can open up a wide range of theoretical and empirical discussions which may prove extremely fertile for examining and understanding student learning, and thus provide a way of engaging in educational enquiry that is not only familiar but meaningful and valid from the disciplinary perspective of literary scholars.

Conclusion

We wish to return now to the pedagogic approach which was at the heart of the evaluation process documented above. Our evaluation suggests that elements of the abstracts exercise were especially beneficial, and in spite of our misgivings about generalizability, explored above, we suggest aspects of these might be extrapolated for transfer to other teaching situations. The exercise was not perceived as taking up much time, and both the exercise of writing and the structured nature of initial tutorial discussion were perceived as

helpful by students. However, the task itself is not infinitely useful: students want to feel they are progressing and over time they feel less engaged with it. To be beneficial in other contexts, the task itself needs to highlight a particular aspect of learning in the local context. Different periods of study within English, or different institutional contexts, may require subtly different forms of writing, and thus the addition of the abstracts exercise is likely to have varying effects (see Lea and Street (1998) for a discussion of different forms of writing between subject areas, and Bruce et al (2007) for how differences in English Studies manifest themselves in the seminar). In this instance, the tension between breadth and focus became more open to discussion through the work of writing and discussing abstracts. It is not that this tension needs eliminating – indeed this is not necessarily desirable – but rather that surfacing it can help students to orientate themselves and their own preferences for study in their environment. Furthermore, English students experience a particular disciplinary paradox: just as they are required to fix and delimit their own thoughts in a concise and rigid but rarely explicated form (the essay), they are simultaneously being pushed to broaden their conceptions of genres, forms, and styles of writing through the study of literature. In some ways, by placing limitations on the expression of ideas, the abstract form may exacerbate this feeling of restriction, as demonstrated by the student complaints about subtleties being overlooked and being prevented from exploring; this may be another factor in the elements of resistance to the exercise. As such, reflective dialogue about writing within the study of language and literature, such as that prompted in this case by the abstract exercise, might help English students to develop a sophisticated understanding of academic writing practices. As one student described, ‘I did not look back at [essays without an abstract] or re-read them as much as I did with those for which I did write an abstract.’ Essay abstracts can provide one method of encouraging students of English to focus their analytical abilities on their own writing.

Furthermore, the close reading of evaluation comments and student work has raised questions about learning in English and evaluation of that learning. First, student progress seems not always to be linear and the most satisfied students in this group are not necessarily the ones learning the most. We would even suggest that some of the strongest levels of satisfaction were expressed by students for whom the exercise functioned mainly to allow them to keep doing, and get praise for, an exercise in which they already excelled. Second, our reading also paid attention to the discourses of agency and independence, which emerged as playing an important role in how these students constructed their feedback to their tutor. The depiction of self as

‘needing help’ or ‘not needing this help any more’ is marked in many of the student responses. This was not a form of feedback that we sought in designing the evaluation questionnaire and has only come to light through multiple re-readings of the responses. Finally, for us, reading student work in conjunction with student evaluation was especially illuminating. It challenged our assumptions about the sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the abstract activity, and our expectations of what the evaluation would reveal. We engaged in a form of ‘close and distant reading’ Chick (2013: 23) that emerged from exchange between researchers, between sources of study, and between the practices and paradigms of the social sciences and the humanities. We would note, in this context, the irony that the abstract form has itself been introduced into the humanities from the social sciences, and has only been put into widespread use with the introduction of online journals. We would therefore propose as our concluding point that much could be gained from further dialogue between literary scholarship and educational enquiry, particularly from practical examples of what can be achieved when employing analytical techniques with which scholars in Arts and Humanities disciplines are already familiar.

ⁱ These points emerged from a peer discussion among participants on Oxford’s Teaching Fellowship Preparation course. Our thanks to Dr Timothy Shephard and Dr Laura Castelli.

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